

Pirut Crue of The Red Dagger

By ELLIS PARKER BUTLER



HAVING raised a boy to the age of ten years, Mrs. Carter had learned that whenever boys hung a banner on the outer walls it was well to go to the barn and give a warning. A banner is by its very nature, an advertisement of concerted effort and Mrs. Carter believed that whenever two or more boys gathered together with a set purpose, something exceedingly unpleasant from an adult point of view, was reasonably sure to happen. She had tried, from his earliest years, to make Eddie a good boy, but "there are such bad boys in Riverbank," as she often said, "and boys will play with boys."

If Mrs. Carter had been able to read the legend on the white banner, she would have gone to the barn immediately, scenting dime novel influences at work. The words the banner bore in straggling letters and in a hue only six shades lighter than blood, were:

PIRUT CRUE OF THE RED DAGGER E. CARTER, HEAD PIRUT

Except the Red Avengers of the Plains, Mrs. Carter dreaded the pirates more than any other game her son indulged in. She felt it was all bad for Eddie; it coarsened him. She did not want him coarsened; he was by nature such a dear boy.

In the hay-loft the ten boys had gathered together that morning like conspirators avoiding the police. Eddie had ordered them to be there. He had planned the affair with his closest friend, Ernst Swartz, known better as Dutch Swartz.

"Well, but they are, aren't they?" he had insisted. "They've got German names, haven't they? Your name is German itself, ain't it? Your father is a German, ain't he?"

"No, he ain't, neither! He's American. He's as American as you are. He was born here just as much as you was. My grandfather come from Germany, but that don't make me German, does it?"

"Well—"

"Well, it don't, does it?"

"Well, how do you know how German everybody in town is? I bet there's lots of Germans in town that are as German as anything! I bet there are hundreds of Germans in town. And how would they like to see you and Smitty and Doodle and Hanky and all the other fellers with German names helping to win this war against them? How would they like that, hey? I guess I know what they would say!"

"What would they say?"

"They'd say you was traitors, that's what!"

"Well, what if they said it? Who cares what they say?"

"You'd care, I guess, if they got together and said 'Dutchy Swartz, he's one of the traitors to the Kaiser; he's working against us. We got to kill him one of the first we kill, because he's a traitor.'"

"Gee!" ejaculated Dutch Swartz. "That's what would happen!"

"But they can't scare old Eddie Carter! I can fool 'em!"

"Yes, but—"

"Well, wait, can't you? You got to wait if you want to hear anything, haven't you? We'll get up a pirate gang."

"But I thought—"

"All right, if you want to interrupt me every minute! How can I explain, if you go interrupting—"

"I just said—"

"Well, do you want me to tell you, or don't you? I don't care if the Germans call you a traitor and kill you. I don't care!"

"Aw! Go ahead, Eddie! I won't butt in!"

"Well, we'll get up a pirate gang," said Eddie. "We'll get up a Red Dagger pirate gang, and have it up in my barn and all the kids of our gang can be in it. Them German spies won't suspect anything about a pirate

gang, will they? I guess not!"

Dutch considered this thoughtfully.

"But what about helping to win the war?" he asked.

"Why, gee!" said Eddie. "That's what we'll be doing, ain't it? That's what it will be for—to do those things. We'll go ahead and do them, but those old German spies won't know it. They'll just think we are pirates, pirating around and sinking ships and everything. And all the time we'll be Red Cross, only we'll be Red Dagger. Then you and Doodle and Smitty and Hanky and all the German-name kids can be in it."

"All right," said Ernst. "When'll we begin?"

"To-morrow morning," said Eddie.

The call and the warning were passed in whispers and Saturday morning the pirates gathered. They came stealthily, pausing at the corner of the barn to glance here and there before they moved around it, pausing again at the door to see that no German spy was on their trail, darting inside the barn hastily. At the top of the stairs Ernst stopped each daring youth and put him through a cross-examination.

"You wait, Smitty! You can't come up until I find out who you are," Ernst said. "What's your name? Where were you born? How old are you? Where do you live?"

ONCE on the deck of the ship—the floor of the hay-loft—the recruit was in the hands of the pirate chief, and was given the oath of "al-leige-ie-ance."

"Eddie! How did you get your hands all paint?" his mother demanded when he came in for noon dinner. "You'll never get it out from around your finger nails. What have you been doing?"

"Well, I can wash it off, can't I?" Eddie demanded. "I can scrub it off with sand, can't I?"

"I'm not scolding you. What were you and all those boys doing this morning?"

"Well, if we can't play a little in our own old hay-loft, I'd like to know where we can play," Eddie complained sullenly. "First you say 'Don't run all over the neighbourhood,' and then you say—"

"That will do!" said Mrs. Carter. "Wash your hands and go eat your dinner."

The Pirut Crue of the Red Dagger had a busy afternoon. The deck plan of the good ship Red Dagger had to be marked out on the hay-loft floor with red paint, leaving the four corners of the loft outside the red lines to represent water—the briny deep through which the sinister, low craft was cutting her way—and a deadly five-pounder had to be mounted forward. There were cutlasses to be shaped out of laths, barrels of grog to be hoisted aboard, tomato boxes and chunks of wood to be carried aboard for seats for the swaggering, hardened pirates.

"Eddie, what you got under your coat?" Martha asked late in the afternoon, when she caught Eddie returning from a raid on the attic.

"Well, I guess I can have some old rags out of the rag-bag, can't I?" he demanded. "I guess you ain't got the say of all the old rag-bags in this house."

"You let me see what you're toting out to that barn, or I'll tell your mother on you when she gets home."

Reluctantly Eddie showed his loot. Martha examined the rags, but found no just cause for complaint. They were scraps of red calico, part of an old red cotton skirt, and a moth-eaten red flannel undershirt. A few minutes later they were bound around the heads of the ten blood-thirsty pirates.

"Shiver my timbers, mates!" cried Eddie. "We ought to have earrings, like Old Blood-and-Bones of the Sweet Susan."

"Well, you've got some copper wire, haven't you?" Ernst reminded him. "We can make some earrings, can't we? Gol-swiggle my eye, yes!"

So they made earrings.

"Well, I guess that's all we can do to-day," said Eddie, as the sun lowered and supper time approached. "We

got to put all these things in the corner and pile the boxes on them, so the old German spies won't find them when they come snooping around. And Monday we got to start doing the deed no eye must see. Hey, mates all?"

"Aye, aye, Captain!" said the murderous nine.

"And you'll all bring your weapons—you know! Two daggers."

"Aye, aye, Captain!"

"And your—your ammunition."

"Aye, aye, Captain!"

Mrs. Carter, seeing them come out of the barn, saw only ten boys coming from their play. She did not like to annoy Eddie by speaking to him again, but she did ask advice of her husband that evening.

"George," she said. "Eddie had at least a dozen boys in the barn to-day."

"Well, the barn is still there, isn't it?" her husband asked.

"Yes, but I think they are playing pirate. Eddie is so touchy when I speak to him that I hate to do it. I think he knows he is getting too old for such games, and is ashamed to be asked about it. But they do use such language when they get together and play pirate. Not the words, but the way they say them. And they think such cruel things—murder and shooting and killing, and things like that. I know it is not good for boys of their age."

"I don't know," said Mr. Carter. "I killed millions—like that—and you married me. I ran them through and through! But when I was an Indian! Ah! I cut the quivering flesh of my captives and tasted it and said, 'This is sweet!'"

"George!"

"I got that out of dear old Fenimore Cooper," he laughed.

NONE the less, Mrs. Carter fretted over the pirate crew in the hay-loft. After school in the afternoons the pirate crew gathered there and the rollicking, ribald songs of the tough old sea-dogs came to her ears. Worst of all were the silences, when the songs ceased, and Mrs. Carter imagined the pirate crew performing unholy pirate rites. They might even be chewing tobacco!

On Wednesday afternoon she could bear it no longer. From the hay-loft where the good ship Red Dagger scudded before a stiff breeze, the good old deep-sea chanty, "Over There," was ringing with all the vigour of ten lusty chests. Mrs. Carter put down her knitting, and stole out to the barn.

"Once more, men!" she heard Eddie order. "Get some go into it this time or, shiver my blasted timbers, there'll be no more grog for a week! Now, all together, hearties—"

Under the cover of the singing, Mrs. Carter stole up the stairs. She put her head just above the floor and observed the horrid scene taking place on the deck of the death-ship, Red Dagger.

Ranged in a circle on the afterdeck of the ship, the nine blood-thirsty members of the pirate crew sat on boxes and chunks of wood, with their captain in their centre. They were a murderous-appearing lot, their heads bound round with red rags, their copper earrings in their ears, their pine pistols and cutlasses stuck in their belts, and flowing or stubbly moustaches traced on their cruel faces with charcoal.

"Oh, pshaw!" exclaimed Ernst pettishly as the song ended.

"What's the matter, Ben Bloodshaw?" demanded the pirate chief. "Shiver my timbers, don't you know how to do it yet? Well, fetch me your daggers and I'll show you again."

Ben Bloodshaw arose, spat like a pirate, and swaggered across the deck to the captain's side, and Mrs. Carter stole noiselessly down the stairs.

The daggers were knitting needles and the pirate crew of the sea-scurge, Red Dagger, were learning to knit "wristlets" for the soldiers, under the deep, dark, daring eye of their dauntless captain!



"Get some 'Go' into it this time or, shiver my timbers, there'll be no more grog for a week! Now, all together, hearties!—'Over there! Over there!'"